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AUTHOR Kasik, Dot Radius
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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, it has been off-limits to talk about failures attributable to the ideology of democratic, student-centered classrooms. However, these classrooms fail for a particular kind of student--the male student who defines himself with a quasi-religious, extremely religious or political stance and who demonstrates strident rejection of racial, religious, political, and gender considerations different from his own. The typical instructor's stance in a democratic classroom is one of vulnerability because of two subject positions: a purposefully dislocated distribution of the teacher's authority and a general willingness to validate the student's opinion. A student who is insecure about his own educational or social position may actually be disoriented by this dislocation of authority. For male students who find acceptance of female instructors difficult, dislocation of the teacher's authority is particularly problematic. The instructor's willingness to validate student opinion over and above her own can often leave her bankrupt when it comes to self-confidence, and hamper her from seeing beyond the student's position. Jonathan, a student who attested that he did not want to deal with "bleeding heart liberals" successfully polarized and disrupted one such composition class with a female instructor. While the democratic, student-centered classroom makes both instructor and student more aware of their vulnerabilities, and while it does not enable all students to succeed, it is still the most productive way to teach composition. (Contains 36 references.) (SAM)

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AUTHORITY AS A PROCESS:
ISSUES OF GENDER IN THE CLASSROOM

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Sometime back I was driving to work one morning, coming absent-mindedly, merrily, over the bridge, over a hill, and onto a clear stretch of single lane highway that is record accident territory, linking Durham with the seacoast. As I came off the bridge I spotted not one, not two, but three New Hampshire Highway Patrol cars, each pulled off the road with their noses pointing my direction. My mind lapsed into police jargon, an inner voice automatically deepened, and my lip sneered with haughty disdain: "Must be something big goin' down."

It wasn't until I reached the third car and the officer pointed at me, that I got the message. Doing fifty in a thirty-five zone, I was the something big. As I sat in my car while the young officer wrote out my speeding citation, I wrestled with feelings vacillating between anger and inferiority. How dare this guy ticket me. Who did he think he was? Never mind that I was an upstanding citizen (more than most, even), or that I voted, or that I rarely speeded, or that I was on my way to a particularly well-respected, responsible and valuable job, never mind that I was almost twice his age, never mind that I had a clear 25-year driving record -- I was scared of his authority!

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Even at that moment I knew that I was doomed to spending the rest of that day and maybe the next, no matter how I reasoned with myself, feeling as a lesser individual because this young man had caught me in a mistake. I should have be able to ration away my guilt because of exterior circumstances: 1)The road, which is the main east-west highway across the state, is heavily trafficked and dangerously narrow mainly due to the state's irresponsibility in highway planning. 2)The officer had no real authority over my perception of myself, simply an artificial authority bestowed upon him by the state of New Hampshire which decreed that he could make me silent and make me pay a fine. 3)The officer's youth meant that I had many more years of driving experience and life experience, and I probably was at least as intelligent as he. None of those logical facts changed what I felt: demoralized and vengeful, victimized and defensive.

I tell this story because at the time it happened, I was struggling to understand the behavior of a particularly difficult male student in my freshman composition class. In a moment of epiphany I saw myself in the place of my student, Jonathan, and me the instructor in the role of that young police officer. Could it be possible that Jon's resistance to me was as automatic and uncontrollable as my reaction to the youthful patrolman's unlikely authority?

I am going to talk about a subject that has been at least partly off limits: the failure of the democratic writing process classroom for a particular kind of student. It's permissible to

examine and analyze the student who fails to measure up; we even get a laugh or a thrill of some sort as we play can-you-top-this with our fellows. And it's legitimate to diagose things that go wrong in our individual practice due to pedagogical ignorance. But it's off limits to talk about failures attributable to the idealogy itself of a democratic, student-centered classroom.

We all understand how the classroom is supposed to work. Students are validated and empowered when they are given choices in their curricula. Coaxing students into positions of autonomy prepares them for a life of scholarship both in academia and beyond. Decentralizing the authority of the teacher helps the formation of peer support groups, promoting community and collaborative learning. But what happens when it goes wrong? When a certain student resists all our efforts to invite (coerce?) his affiliation with others? When a student balks at our ability to lead him into our wonderworld of community?

Jonathan came into my classroom with a history of educational system failure. He'd bounced from public school to private prep school to being a high school dropout, finally obtaining his GED. At nineteen, he'd already spent six months on the road hitchhiking from Florida to Alaska and back home to New England with a detour along the way to a detox center for drug addiction. Entering the classroom at the University of New Hampshire as a special student, he was determined to earn enough credits to be eligible to apply for full time status. After the first day of class, having read through my syllabus and having

spent an hour cracking jokes under his breath, he stood before me with feet planted, squared shoulders defiant under his ankle-length WWII German army coat, his month-old skinhead shave now bristling. "I hope I don't have to deal with a bleeding-heart liberal in here," he said, meaning me. Not an auspicious beginning to an even less propitious semester through which we maintained an ungainly balance in male-student/female-instructor association both inside and outside the classroom. Throughout, Jon seemed hell-bent on disrupting every facet of the democratic classroom from badgering other students (mostly females) to undermining whatever leadership I maintained. Our high point (low point?) was midway through the semester when he brought his father into the fray with a phone call to the dean's office, threatening to sue me and the school for libel, attesting that I had allowed other students in the classroom to lable him a bigot. Jonathan, the dean and I came to the conference table. Jon did not want to withdraw from my class; I drew up a contract, Jon signed it, and we maintained our uneasy truce throughout the last half of the semester.

I was not alone. In a year, at least six other female instructors were placed in similar situations. Two students were brought before a disciplinary board. In each case, the student is male, the instructor female. In each case the student has identified himself with an extremist religious, quasi-religious, or political stance. In each case, the student has stridently demonstrated rejection of racial, religious, political, and

gender considerations other than his own.

As I dealt day to day with Jon, seeing him in conference, watching his isolation among peers, the very foundations of my pedagogical theories shook. As Jon's disruptions eroded more and more of my leadership, I felt my credibility slip. Interpreting the conflict as an affront against me, I retreated to a position of defense. My journal writing and reflective activities ceased and my record-keeping or the resort to empirical observation increased. My preoccupation with Jonathan's problematic behavior had effectively stifled my voice.

It wasn't only my voice. My student-teacher conflict with Jonathan went far beyond the perimeter of our relationship. The power struggle, centered as it was in the classroom itself, seeped into my dealings with each of the other twenty-three students and into their associations with each other.

What I noticed first was the polarity. The classroom quickly turned into us-against-him. Much of the students' energies were channeled into dealing with Jon. In discussions they took turns fighting him and avoiding him. Several told me that they avoided responding in class discussion for fear of being attacked. On final class evaluations, one student commented that I hadn't controlled Jon strongly enough, but another commented that I hadn't allowed him to freely express his ideas as much as I could have or should have. (She was right; free expression to Jonathan meant taking over the class. I didn't allow that.)

What discussion there was was limited. Because I was aware that Jonathan would lose control if the class tackled certain subjects, I began avoiding them too. Diversity was off limits. Sexuality was off limits. Politics was off limits. Not that a composition class should center on these issues, but much of the example writing that I bring to a classroom to illustrate voice, argument, bias or fairness, and topic choice deals with them. I curbed those.

It was particularly painful to me to witness that some of the students who might have found their voices in a different situation didn't. Mostly these were female students.

There was a forced, artificial polarity in interpretation of literature too. Just as the class fought against Jon socially, they retreated into opposite views of interpretation on whatever they were reading. Jonathan became the measuring rod against whom everyone rationed her opinion. Students frequently told me "I agreed with him on that specific point, but I felt I had to go against him just on principle." Because he was so soundly disliked, students feared disassociation by their peers if they agreed with him.

Recognizing the need for my own validation, I did not suffer in silence. Early in the semester I had allerted Andy Merton, the head of our composition department, and various of my colleagues of the situation. I also began reading and studying everything I could find that might have clues to unlock Jon's personality and help me deal with what was happening in my

classroom. Most of all, I wondered what it was about me or about my program that made me the recepient of these circumstances.

To begin with, the typical instructor's stance in a democratic classroom is one of vulnerability because of two specific positions: one, we purposefully dislocate the expected distribution of authority, and two, we exhibit a willingness generally speaking to validate the student's opinion. No where else in the university are these beliefs so overt.

An average student walking into English 401 may be surprized at the dislocation of authority, but a student insecure of his educational or social position may actually be disoriented. Auny San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize-winner says in the Far Eastern Economic Review, "It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it." A student-centered classroom asks that students assume more academic decision-making, more power, than most have been used to. To ask Jonathan to be responsible for his own education panicked him; he'd always been led to believe that was the teacher's job. In a disagreement over a specific essay he'd written, he told me, "I'm not here to be taught to look at the issues. And you're here to teach me the rules of writing." The statement is telling because it illustrates both his confusion about who was doing the teaching and his fear that he might have to learn something beyond a set of rules.

Another facet of this dislocation of authority is purely

gender-based. By the time they get to college, students have had many female teachers. In the early years, most teachers are women, and that feels particularly comforting when emotional nurturance is an overwhelming need. But through the secondary years, men appear more and more frequently as children are "weaned" from emotional nuturance to educational leadership. The inference that higher education is a man's job is clear, and by the time students get to college, a female educational authority is startling. No student would be expected, after all, to write home with the news "My biology/calculus/history professor is male." In contrast, not only are many lower-level composition teachers women, but the program itself often seems taught from a feminine perspective. Openness, accessibility, nurturance, vulnerability, individual validation...these are all "womanly" activities.

Robert Brooke in a February,1988, CCC article entitled "Modeling a Writer's Identity: Reading and Imitation in the Writing Classroom" (39:1, 23-41) describes how students learn "by imitating another person, and not a text or a process. Writers learn to write by imitating other writers, by trying to act like writers they respect." And again, "Imitation as a learning/teaching strategy...is more concerned with the identity of the writer than the form of the text. When imitation works, it is because the student writer admires the teacher enough to want to act like her"(23). For male students who find acceptance of female instructors difficult, the principle Brooke outlines

can be a stumbling block. The students whom I have noticed having trouble with my authority or with the authority of other instructors are male. Young women don't usually balk at authority; they might act out in other ways - dishonesty, double-dealing, downright nastiness - but they get around the assignments rather than around the instructor.

The second part of our stance, the willingness to continually validate student opinion over and above our own, leaves us emotionally bankrupt when it comes to self-confidence. When Andy Merton elicited a discussion in staff meeting about "difficult" students and asked those of us who had been put into that position to share our experiences, the reaction from our group of colleagues was what I call the "bandaid approach." We had come hoping for emotional support, and instead we were recepients of advice. "Perhaps you should have done thus-and-such" or "I do thus-and-such to ward off/prevent such situations" prefaced most comments that day. The accepted stance - because we're in the business of student validation - put each of us in the position of fault. Our weaknesses, not the students', must have caused our failures. It wasn't that our colleagues were unkind; it was that the pedagogical mindset hampered us from seeing beyond a student's position. The very quality that makes us good teachers was now in operation against us.

What I have discussed so far has dealt mainly with two perspectives, that of the classroom and that of the instructor. It is valuable to note, I think, that both perspectives are owned

by system insiders. If there is to be any validity to this study, the perspective of the outsider, the student himself, is most important. And that brings me back to where I began with my feeling of vulnerability when brushing up against authority as I was stopped by a highway patrolman and the resulting insight into Jon's position.

Let me look first at that position of being "outside." Tom DeBois is a psychologist working out of the student counseling center at UNH. "Young people like Jonathan seem to fall into patterns of feeling separated, disconnected from others. Often this is a defense mechanism coming into play after severe emotional trauma and is followed up by strict adherence to an ultra-conservative code of ethics, which further isolate."

Jonathan's remark to me on the first day of class ("I want to know I won't be dealing with some liberal here") was a clear signal that a rigid code of ethics was in operation. He was indeed religious, and on one occasion told me he believed it was possible for him to attain perfection and equality with God. (Here I note that "religious" doesn't necessarily mean "full of faith" but rather denotes blind devotion to a moral system, a rigid series of rules and regulations that promises the adherent safety so long as he stays within its bounds. In that definition, political systems can also become religions.) Jonathan was a young man who had dabbled with the wild side - drugs, etc. - before coming to UNH. His religious system had saved him from what he perceived a lost life, and his hold on

sanity depended on maintaining that system intact. Part of the code from his system placed the young white male on a pedestal of privilege and authority. As a female, I wasn't allowed on his pedestal; hence, I shouldn't have been in a leadership position over him. I became the enemy on two counts: I was female, and I was threatening his code by encouraging him to consider other points of view.

According to DeBois, a necessary component of one's inflexible allegience to his code is low self-esteem. Although he may outwardly exude self-possession, the show is not to be confused with healthy ego. A lack of self-confidence leads to swagger. Both Jonathan and his father admitted education failures throughout Jon's childhood. His father simply said he'd always been the difficult one. Whether or not that constituted blame toward Jon, I don't know. Jonathan himself admitted no blame. He wrote a lengthy essay about how traditional education had failed him, beginning with his experiences in first grade and detailing each year up until his junior in high school when he dropped out and sought his GED. In a way, he had announced to me as soon as the semester began that he feared I'd programmed him to failure - covering his tracks, but also predestining himself.

Socially he was an admitted failure as well. Often he would purposely do something outrageous or say something outrageous just at the moment when friendship or a relationship looked possible. This too I thought was a way of preserving whatever fragile ego was there. During the last few weeks of classes when

students in my section are grouped for collaborative work, I put out a questionnaire which asks each student for the names of classmates she would feel comfortable working with and the names of those she would feel uncomfortable with. Jon's name appeared on the "uncomfortable" list in all but two cases. I assigned him to a group with both those individuals, and one of them came later to tell me that she had inadvertently put Jonathan's name on the "comfortable" list. Once the questionnaires were collected, Jon came to me with poignant, childlike questioning: "Is there anyone in the class who wants to work with me? I'm always afraid of what people think of me." No one else asked.

Both Andy Merton and Tom DeBois have spent recent research in identifying our present national political climate as an indicator for student performance. Both cite the sort of confusing polarizations that on the one hand tout the importance of education and on the other refuse to fund it, or that preaches a resurgence of family values but fails to support paid maternity leave, or that says "just say no" but refuses to fund drug rehabilitation programs as disorienting to young adults. If society invalidates itself, they argue, how does a young adult, struggling with maturity, exchanging a dependent life-style for independence, and experiencing the biggest transition of his life to date, come to any conclusive decisions? It was in this emotional climate then of naive vulnerability that Jonathan entered the college experience. Robert Brooke's says,

> They [freshmen] come with a wealth of past

> experience and, by the time they reach college, a fairly well-defined sense of the kinds of persons they are...Their interaction with any attempt to model an identity for them, then, must take into account the identies they have already developed for themselves. The actual experience of any classroom that involves identity modeling, then, can be seen as a negotiation between the identities offered by the classroom context and the identities of the students as already fairly-well-formed individuals (26).

If I were to interact with Jonathan, I had to interact with his already "fairly-well-formed" personality, including his biases and his fears. His reaction to me would be necessarily for the most part unconscious, at a gut level, below the ability to reason. That was where he experienced the threat. Below reason. That also is where he felt the threat from any race, political persuasion, gender or religion that differed from his; below reason. Just as the patrolman triggered my feelings of self-loathing, so my presence triggered Jonathan's feelings of self-loathing.

Let me go back to capture my gut-level emotions when stopped by the patrolman. Though it was irrational, he made me feel inferior. Though it was irrational, his authority made me feel threatened. The threat was self-imposed on the basis of my prior belier structure, not a rationally-developed structure, but a

gut-level felt structure. The power of authority isn't usually rational. It is a perceived power, received and determined by the senses.

Not rational, but for Jon, a teacher represented authority. Proper authority was male. As a teacher, I would have been unacceptable if I had been another race, another religion, another political persuasion, or another gender. I struck out in three categories. Of all the categories, the lowest, the most menial, the least acceptable, was female.

To make matters worse, I reminded him of an entire body of people who had let him down before, who had previously held the power to make him inferior: all the female teachers he'd ever had. For perhaps twelve years of schooling, females had told him he was unacceptable. That was the gut-level factor that sealed my fate. The most important point in all of this is that there is no rationale for much of the perceived authority in our society. Authority is so often arbitrary, that we confuse real authority with artificial authority.

What authority does a 25-year-old patrolman have over me? Only one: traffic regulation. Beyond that, he has no authority to cause me to doubt myself. When served the citation, my reason should have been able to tell myself that yes, I had been speeding that particular morning (along with a thousand other people who didn't happen to get caught!) so I was guilty of that one infraction, but I was not less of a person. Instead, I allowed what I perceived his opinion of me to be to ruin my

perception of myself. I projected so that when he said, "You were speeding" it was as if he had said, "You are inferior." So with Jonathan. I said, "Jon, you have a problem in this one specific area," and he heard me say, "You are an inferior human being." And it was all gut-level, below reason, perceived and felt, not rationalized.

I have no conclusion. I have no solutions. Undoubtedly I'll be dealing with more Jonathans in the future, and I believe in the success of our work enough to accept that fact. And I still conclude wholeheartedly that at the moment, the democratic, student-centered classroom is the best way to teach composition.

So far, my study has produced lots of questions and few answers. I think it's been a valuable experience for me to face as a composition instructor and student. It's made me acutely aware of my vulnerabilities and it's given me an opportunity to see the depth of my students' pain, far beyond the one individual I've used for illustration here.

A word of follow-up on Jonathan and the others I mentioned earlier. Jon finished the semester in my class and went on to apply to a private religious college. I felt particularly gratified when he asked me to write his recomendation, whether as an acknowledgement of our success in the semester or a bowing to the system, I don't know.

As for the other difficult students from the year: two were expelled both from their freshmen composition classes and from the university. One other remains in class. Still another nose-

dived on his grade when he refused to abide by the perameters of his instructor and is now contesting.

All of their instructors are still teaching.

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AUTHORITY AS A PROCESS:

ISSUES OF GENDER IN THE CLASSROOM

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